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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 KABUL 001327

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STATE FOR SCA/FO DAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A, S/CRS, SA/PB, S/CT,
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER ASEC MARR AF IR

SUBJECT: FM SPANTA'S VISIT TO IRAN: CONCERNS AMIDST
COOPERATION

REF: A. KABUL 919

¶B. KABUL 1031

¶C. KABUL 829

Classified By: DCM Richard Norland for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During wide-ranging meetings in Iran April 10-12, Afghan Foreign Minister Spanta deflected Iranian pressure for an agreement on water rights surrounding the Harirud River and Salma Dam project, pressed Iran to stop supporting the National Front, and declined (again) an Iranian offer to conclude a security agreement. FM Spanta sought a delay in the forced return of one million refugees from Iran but received no commitments. The two countries signed a technical MOU on border management facilities. Spanta asked Iran to fund 100 percent of the Khaf-Herat railroad project if no other donors came forward. Afghanistan sees the railroad project increasingly in strategic terms as it links the country to Iran (and thus Europe) and Central Asia. Iranian President Ahmadinejad accepted an invitation to visit Afghanistan in June. While Afghanistan welcomes Iran's technical and economic assistance, growing Iranian influence over Afghan MPs, government officials, and the media are of increasing concern. END SUMMARY

Spanta's Meetings

¶2. (U) On April 16, Foreign Minister Spanta's Senior Policy Advisor, Davood Moradian, briefed Deputy Political Counselor on Spanta's April 10-12 visit to Iran. During his three-day visit, Spanta met with Iranian President Ahmadinejad, Foreign Minister Mottaki, Interior Minister Pour-Mohammed, and Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Larijani.

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Spanta delivered a speech at the Institute for Political and International Studies and gave a number of press interviews with local media.

¶3. (C) According to Moradian, the main issues on the agenda were the Harirud River and Salma Dam, Iranian sponsorship of the National Front, and a long-standing Iranian proposal for a bilateral treaty or security agreement. Refugees, border management, narcotics, the Khaf-Herat railroad project, and a June visit to Afghanistan by the Iranian President were also discussed.

Iran Pushing for Agreement on Harirud River

¶4. (C) Moradian explained that Iran has been pushing for some time for an agreement on water rights surrounding the Harirud River and Salma Dam project (being rebuilt by India).

The Harirud originates in Afghanistan but flows along the Iran-Afghan border into Turkmenistan. Iran has wanted to establish a commission to start work on distributing water from the project once completed sometime in 2009. Iran pushed the issue again during Spanta's visit.

¶5. (C) Spanta reportedly rehashed the GOA's position that Afghanistan was not in a position to begin negotiations or establish a commission, explaining that the GOA did not have the technical expertise nor sufficient data and would need more time to prepare. Moradian said there were other unstated reasons for Afghan reluctance to go forward. He shared that the issue was especially sensitive for Spanta since he was from Herat and he did not want to be seen as "betraying Afghan interests". Another reason was that Pakistan was pushing for a similar agreement on water from the Kabul River. Concluding an agreement with Iran would

KABUL 00001327 002 OF 004

allow Pakistan to apply more pressure for its own agreement. As the GOA wants to avoid engaging Pakistan on water rights without first resolving other bilateral issues, e.g., the Durand line, it will not move forward with Iran. Moradian believes that Iran is trying to exploit Afghanistan's current weak position as a "failed state". For its part, the GOA will continue to hold off Iranian entreaties and will look for a way forward based on international law and scientific data.

Disapproval of Iranian Sponsorship of National Front

¶6. (C) During his meetings with Iranian FM Mottaki and Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Larijani,

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Spanta raised Afghan concerns over direct Iranian support to the recently formed grouping known as the National Front (ref A). According to Moradian, Spanta warned Iran against a return to the "politics of the 90s" and criticized Iran for providing material and media support to the National Front and its backers. The senior Iran officials justified their support to the National Front by arguing that Iran needed an insurance policy against what it saw as the gradual return of the Taliban. As it has before, Iran referred to the Musa Qala deal in Helmand and questioned Spanta on how the GOA, with UK support, could allow the Taliban to occupy the village. Moradian characterized Iran's support for the National Front as its "Plan B". Spanta was also concerned that Iran might try to use the National Front to cut a better deal on Harirud water. Asked if Iran's support for the National Front was not a direct criticism of the Karzai government, Moradian said that he did not think that Iran was particularly concerned about the Karzai government, whom it sees as a "friend of Iran".

Iran Wants An Agreement Aimed At Foreign Forces

¶ 7. (C) Iran has approached Afghanistan a number of times to conclude a treaty or security agreement similar to those with the UK, China, ISAF, or the U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership. The issue was raised again, but "more keenly", during Spanta's visit. Moradian explained that the centerpiece of the proposed security agreement would be language prohibiting third parties from using Afghan soil for "activities against Iran". The Iranians reportedly hinted that such an agreement would obviate the need for Iran to support the National Front. Moradian said that Spanta has each time declined to pursue such an agreement, due to concerns over reaction from Washington and Brussels.

¶ 8. (C) Moradian believes Iran will continue to push for a security agreement in different ways. He sees Iran's sponsorship of both the National Front and the National Unity Council (ref B) as an attempt to test the legal basis for U.S. forces and ISAF to remain in Afghanistan. Rather than preclude them, a security agreement would only reinforce the goals of the National Front and National Unity Council, Moradian believes.

Iranian Threats Against Spanta

¶ 9. (S) According to Moradian, Iran has threatened Spanta directly by saying that it could "make life very difficult for him" in his current position. Spanta has reportedly raised this with President Karzai who reassured the Foreign Minister that he enjoyed Karzai's full support. Asked what form this would take, Moradian said that Iranian-sponsored MPs, members of the National Directorate for Security (which he claimed is "Iran-oriented"), and the Iranian-backed media were trying to turn Spanta into an "Iranian puppet". He said Spanta was in favor of receiving more support from Iran but

KABUL 00001327 003 OF 004

if the Iranian presence threatened stability or relations with other countries, he would propose that Afghanistan hold back further cooperation.

¶ 10. (C) Moradian characterized Iran as an "ideologue state", one not thinking rationally. If it were rational, it would see that normal, mutual, and professional relations with the GOA would be in its best interests and that Afghanistan could be its best friend in the region. Moradian highlighted one particularly worrisome development in the increased presence of Iranian-influenced media in Afghanistan. He referred to the new Iranian funded television station, Tamadun (civilization), which was scheduled to start programming this summer (ref C). Afghans were now in Tehran training to disseminate its agenda which will be "discreetly and professionally anti-American", he said.

Refugees: 3 million Expected to Return

¶ 11. (C) Spanta reportedly asked Iran for more leniency for the one million Afghan refugees that Iran wants returned starting in May. Iran offered no assurances or promises, only that it would consider the request.

¶ 12. (C) Moradian explained that the GOA was wholly unprepared for the return of such large numbers, including possibly two million from Pakistan. Having one to three million unemployed returning to Afghanistan would pose a "major security challenge". He said that Spanta has asked Speakers Mujaddedi and Qanooni to approach counterparts in the Iranian Parliament to reconsider the forced return. Spanta has also asked President Karzai to make a personal appeal to President Ahmadinejad.

New Border Management MOU

¶13. (U) Spanta and Mottaki signed an MOU on border management on April 11. Moradian stressed this was a technical document to allow both sides to clarify border demarcations, update documentation, and reconstruct and modernize border management facilities over a two year period.

Narcotics

¶14. (SBU) Moradian reported that narcotics was discussed but no new issues were raised. Spanta asked Iran to join an Afghan-UK-Iran trilateral group on counter-narcotics. Iran will consider the proposal.

Khaf-Herat Railroad

¶15. (SBU) Spanta asked Iran to fund 100 percent of the Khaf-Herat railroad project if additional donors did not come forward. According to Moradian, Iran has agreed to fund 60 percent of the project. The other 40 percent still needed to be funded by other countries. He stressed that Afghanistan saw the project in strategic terms as it would increase trade with Iran and Central Asia (and even Europe) and provide a psychological boost to the Afghan people. He made an appeal for U.S. funding, arguing that the project would have huge spillover effects. Afghanistan wanted to avoid dealing with the "bureaucracy" of the World Bank, so is focusing on bilateral donors. China, India, and Kazakhstan have been approached. Moradian repeatedly asked for U.S. funding to get the project rolling.

Iranian President Visit to Afghanistan

KABUL 00001327 004 OF 004

¶16. (C) Moradian confirmed press reports that President Karzai extended an invitation to President Ahmadinejad to visit Afghanistan. Both sides have agreed on a June timeframe and will be looking to sign some agreements, such as the building of a new university in Herat, to be named the Khahaji Abdollah Ansari University.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) Afghanistan is increasingly finding itself between a rock and a hard place in its relations with Iran. While it wants normal relations with its Iranian neighbor, even Afghanistan may reach a tipping point if it judges that excessive Iranian influence is undermining its national sovereignty. While loathe to turn down Iranian largesse in the form of trade and economic assistance, and concerned about even more direct forms of pressure that Iran may seek to apply, Afghanistan will continue to strive for balance in its relations with Iran, its other neighbors, and the U.S. which it firmly views as its most important strategic partner. Ahmadinejad's June visit, if it happens, will be a key indicator of what direction things will take.

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